

NORTH AIRPORT BOULEVARD REVITALIZATION PLAN



Presented to the Travis County Commissioners Court

January 17, 2017

Overview

Executive Summary

The North Airport Boulevard Revitalization Plan (“Plan”) serves as a guiding document for Travis County that articulates a vision for the North Airport Boulevard revitalization area in Austin, Travis County, Texas. The Plan also:

1. unifies and builds upon various County, City and Neighborhood plans and initiatives
2. provides a framework for designation as a Community Revitalization Plan (CRP) under the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA) 2017 Qualified Allocation Plan (QAP); and
3. lends support for the allocation of public resources.

Travis County has adopted strategies to effectuate the County’s priorities of effectively serving the County’s core functions. The North Airport Boulevard Revitalization Plan serves as documentation of the County’s effort to effectively provide housing in conjunction with the provision of key county services to spur the revitalization of an area that was once vibrant as a main automobile corridor, but has, in the past two decades, fallen into a patchwork of underdeveloped properties inadequately served by infrastructure. This area is now the focus of major capital expenditures—both public and private—to encourage infill development as well as infrastructure and transportation improvements aimed at creating a sustainable, walkable, transit-oriented, dense yet human-scaled environment with its own unique neighborhood charm.

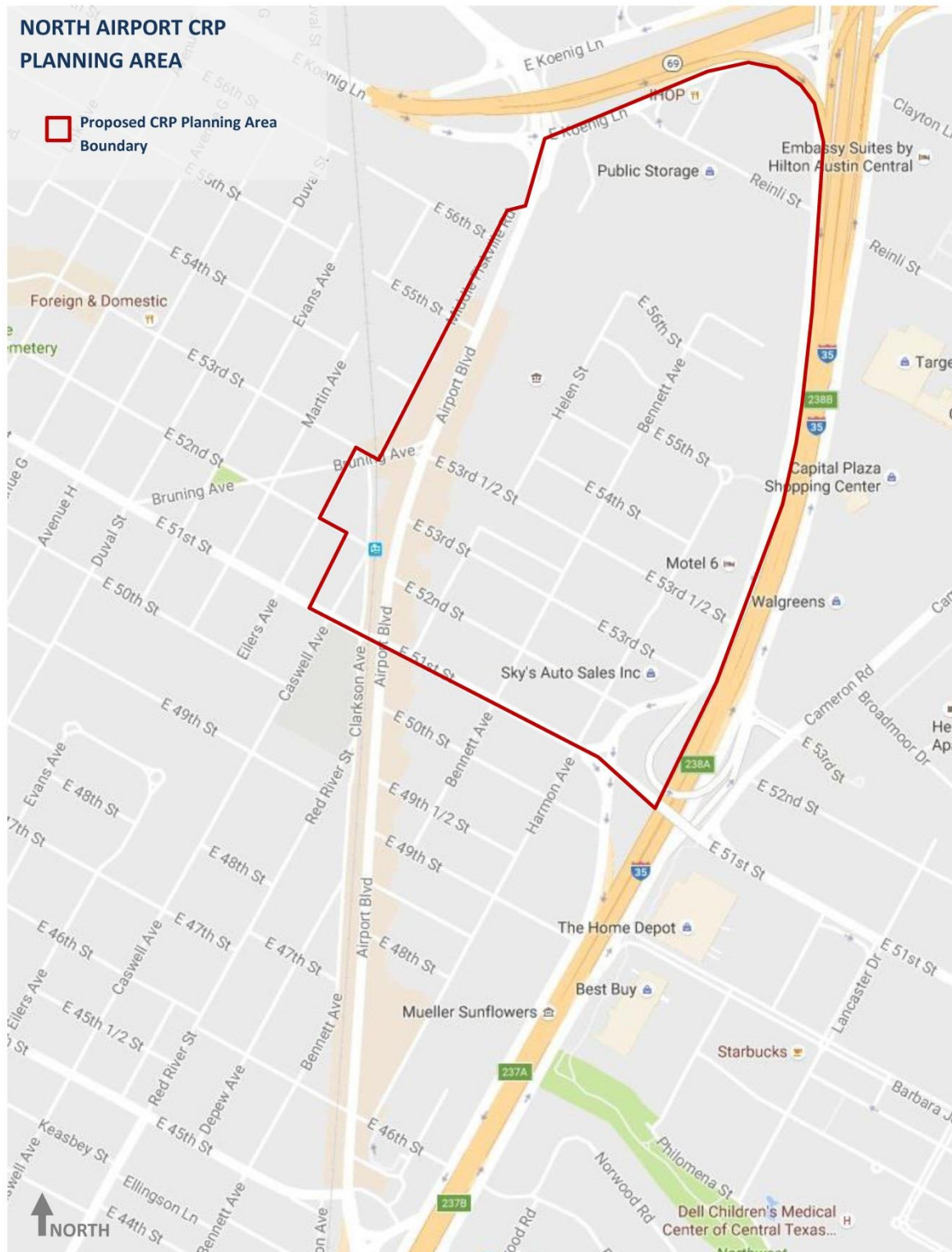
Boundary Area and Description

The boundaries for this Revitalization Plan includes the Ridgetop neighborhood and a portion of the North Loop neighborhood and is described by the following boundaries and as depicted in Exhibit A.

Middle Fiskeville Road and Clarkson Avenue to the west;
East 51st Street to the south;
Interstate Highway 35 to the east;
East Koenig Lane to the north.

This area is largely defined by the North Airport Boulevard corridor, which is an area which has suffered from neglect, disinvestment, and aged housing stock, and as such, has been the target of several well-defined planning efforts over the last ten years. The area is characterized by surface parking and chaotic signage, lots selling used autos and used tires, dilapidated and/or vacant strip malls, and failed business establishments in blighted structures. Overall, the area is unsightly, is not conducive to pedestrian traffic, and as such has deteriorated over the years to an area that has been riddled with problems related to petty theft, drug related activity, and transiency.

Exhibit A





Planning Efforts

In on-going efforts to encourage a more robust community character and facilitate quality redevelopment, many entities, including Travis County, the City of Austin, and the Ridgetop and North Loop Neighborhood Associations, have been involved in these planning efforts and have developed action plans for this area. Each plan (listed below) includes the North Airport Boulevard corridor and details different strategies to revitalize the area.

Plan/Strategy Name	Commissioned By	Plan Date
Travis County Master Plan Update (“2015 Master Plan”)	Travis County	March 2015
Airport Boulevard Corridor Development Program (“ABCDP”)	City of Austin	February 2014
Travis County North Campus Master Plan Report	Travis County	April 6, 2010
Upper Airport Boulevard Initiative (“UABI”)	City of Austin	December 10, 2009
The North Loop Neighborhood Plan (“North Loop Plan”)	North Loop NA	May 23, 2002

These plans all involved heavy community engagement. The most relevant of these plans, specifically the ABCDP, and the Travis County Master Plans, involved multiple meetings with neighbors and stakeholders in the areas. Public hearings regarding the Travis County North Campus Master Plan Report were held beyond what was mandated by local ordinance, and the Commissioners Court encouraged ongoing participation of all stakeholders and community members, including the Ridgetop Neighborhood Association and the North Loop Neighborhood Associations, in all Travis County planning discussions related to its facilities in the area. The ABCDP neighborhood meetings were held in conjunction with City planning meetings to reach a larger audience and maximize publicity. Targeted outreach efforts including workshops, presentations, mailings, and phone surveys were carried out through August to December of 2011, and community feedback was used in the development of the final plan. More recently, in September 2016, Travis County met with the Ridgetop Neighborhood Association and the North Loop Neighborhood Association to provide an update on its planning efforts in this area, and specifically with regard to the Travis County North Campus mixed-use project, which is described in detail below.

This Plan incorporates these previous and on-going efforts and community feedback. Specifically, this Plan builds on the 2015 Travis County Master Plan Update, approved on April 21, 2015 (the “2015 Master Plan”), and a provision that the “Travis County Commissioners Court will prioritize redevelopment of county-owned property that has additional capacity to provide affordable housing for the community.” The 2015 Master Plan is an update and continuation of the original report adopted by the Commissioner’s Court during the April 6, 2010 Voting Session, which laid the groundwork for long-term redevelopment recommendations.

This Plan also builds on the City of Austin’s intensive planning for this area, which not only includes the ABCDP, but also involves the transition to its form-based code initiative entitled “Code NEXT,” that will

“promote pedestrian friendly, mixed use development to implement the established vision for the area by increasing redevelopment potential in the corridor.”

As is evident from all of these planning efforts, Travis County, and the City of Austin, share the goal of revitalizing this critical area. As an example, this Plan and the 2015 Master Plan work in concert with ABCDP, which looks to improve safe, efficient and multimodal accessibility while creating “a context for sustainable mixed use development at key locations (ABCDP pp E-3).” This Plan’s planning area is contained in Zone 1 of ABCDP’s planning area. Further, because the 2015 Master Plan includes the redevelopment of former blighted buildings to a mixed-use development comprised of office, retail and affordable housing, the 2015 Master Plan carries out the directive set forth in the ABCDP.

It is important to note that the recommendations of the ABCDP will be implemented with funding secured by the voter approved 2016 Mobility Bond package. The City of Austin has directed by resolution that the City Manager begin coordination, design and engineering activities as soon as possible for all projects associated with the \$482 million for corridor improvement projects, which includes the Airport Boulevard Corridor. To this end, the City of Austin has issued a solicitation for a Corridor Consultant, which will serve as a third-party to assist staff in conducting analysis and other activities to support development of the Corridor Construction Program, as requested by City Council. The Corridor Consultant is scheduled to be approved by City Council in February 2017.

Problems in the Revitalization Area:

This Plan provides action items to address the following problems identified through community outreach and studies:

- **Infrastructure:** long-term disinvestment and neglect of the Airport corridor streetscape which contributes to a hostile pedestrian environment and disincentive to future commercial and residential growth; few existing water quality or detention ponds;
- **Blighted/Underutilized Properties:** the presence of blighted and significantly underutilized properties with potential for redevelopment;
- **Lack of affordable housing:** rents in this area have risen significantly in recent years and no new affordable stock is available;
- **Neighborhood Conditions:** underdeveloped frontage along both sides of the Airport corridor, and limited neighborhood connectivity to the west of the corridor and rail line;
- **Transportation:** lack of multi-modal transportation options and infrastructure.

The primary goal of this Plan is to revitalize the plan area using the existing framework of the other area plans, within the context of the factors listed above. In coordination with the goals of the other plans, this Plan aims to:

- Improve neighborhood conditions through the development of corridor frontage and neighborhood connectivity;
- Create a context for sustainable, mixed-use development at key locations such as the Travis County North Campus;

- Provide new, higher functioning county offices, including the County Tax Office, the County Clerk's Office, the Sheriff's Office, and the Health and Community Services and Veterans Services. Improving the functionality of these vital community services benefits the service users and the neighborhood residents alike, as the County offices are a hub in this planning area and as such play a critical role in creating street activity and pedestrian traffic;
- Improve housing quality, variety, and sustainability with a focus on creating a more affordable and diverse housing stock, which currently consists of single family housing, small apartment complexes, condos, and townhouses;
- Improve access to and quality of City transportation and infrastructure to ensure that neighborhood residents don't have to rely on automobile transportation;
- Increase accessibility to adequate social and recreational facilities, and other public facilities;
- Improve pedestrian, bicycle, and vehicle safety;
- Amplify economic development opportunities for existing businesses;
- Improve the quality of public infrastructure and public facilities;
- Strengthen connections between land use and transportation, maximizing use of existing properties and encouraging compact and human-scale development.

Plan Action Objectives

Housing and Community Services: Through this Plan, the County seeks to provide balanced housing opportunities throughout neighborhoods by encouraging the development of rental and mixed-use housing projects for all income levels and populations, including the local employment base, young professionals, families, seniors, and others. Development assistance includes funding for land acquisition or a land donation, interim and permanent financing, and/or reimbursements of ad valorem taxes. A key element is the County's role in the Travis County North Campus mixed-use project, for which it issued an RFP and selected a developer partner in the fall of 2016. This project includes new, higher functioning Tax Office and Health and Community Services and Veteran Services offices improving service delivery to county residents and approximately 146 units of affordable workforce housing. The benefits of this particular project for the neighborhood as a whole are numerous. First, moving certain community services out of the County's building to the north allows all the county services offered in this location to improve as there will be more space for remodeling to fit specifically the needs of each department. Second, almost all of the County services provided at this location have a public element, meaning that people from the neighborhood and all over Travis County come to this location to pay taxes, pick up marriage licenses, and to file real estate documents, for example. This type of activity is an opportunity to create a more active streetscape and a more vibrant neighborhood, especially given that the County's first major redevelopment project at this location will be a vertical mixed use development with ground floor retail, designed to promote a more urban street environment. Third, Travis County North Campus mixed-use project will provide much needed affordable housing in this area for existing neighborhood residents as well as Travis County staff already working at this location, of which an estimated 59 percent would income qualify.

Public Infrastructure Improvements: One of the primary County strategies involves the targeting of public resources to improve the physical condition of neighborhood streets and infrastructure. Types of completed and planned public infrastructure projects within the Plan include (1) street, sidewalk, curb and gutter improvements, (2) water and wastewater, (3) streetscape improvements and pedestrian amenities including street benches, trees, lighting and sidewalks, and (4) gateway improvements and community features to create a distinctive neighborhood feel. Because the County is the largest land holder in the planning area, the County will be responsible for implementing these improvements on a critical stretch of Airport Boulevard as part of the redevelopment of its North Campus. These improvements will set the tone for other land owners or developers to make similar improvements as other un- or underdeveloped tracts are repositioned. The City's ABCDP Program is also key to seeing these improvements implemented. As discussed above, the City will invest \$482 million to implement prioritized corridor improvement projects, and the Airport Boulevard corridor is one of them. Preliminary estimates for the improvements needed at Airport Boulevard are \$20 million. As mentioned above, the City of Austin staff is already in the process of hiring a consultant to lead these efforts.

Transportation: Providing transportation options/enhancements to better connect the North Airport Boulevard corridor to the rest of Austin is considered a primary goal and is necessary to ensure local and regional connectivity. Opportunities for light rail, bus, bike, and pedestrian linkages for residents of all incomes and ages have been considered with the Airport Boulevard Corridor Development Program, and are vital to achieving neighborhood sustainability. Pedestrian boulevards and protected bike lanes in particular are a safe and enjoyable way to link neighborhoods and connect residents of all ages to homes, schools and outdoor amenities. Again, because the County is the larger land holder in this area, it will be responsible for effectuating these improvements regarding linkages to public transportation. The City's ABCDP, with recommendations for linkage improvements along the Airport Boulevard Corridor, will be implemented as part of the 2016 Mobility Bond package, described above. Of particular note is that Travis County has been closely working with Capital Metro, the regional transportation authority, to support a light rail stop at 53rd Street and Airport, which would be a critical aspect to spurring further revitalization of this planning area and connecting residents to jobs.

Recent and Planned Investment in the Area

The North Airport Boulevard Revitalization Plan primarily builds upon the 2010 Travis County Master Plan, as updated in 2015, which focuses on the 13-acre "North Campus" area located along Airport Boulevard between 53½ Street and Helen Street. Over the course of ten years, the Commissioners Court completed a series of building acquisitions to assemble four parcels of land just over 13 acres along Airport Boulevard, which is now identified as Travis County's North Campus. In effectuating this plan, Travis County has spent significant amount of funds, the sources of which was primarily cash reserves and bond financing, to effectuate major capital improvements at its campus, which has contributed significantly to the revitalization efforts in the planning area. This spending has occurred in three major projects, which reflect an investment by Travis County of approximately \$22.5 million.

The first project is the 5501 Airport Boulevard project, which involved the purchase and remodel of a large commercial strip center that was vacant and had fallen into disrepair. Travis County purchased the

124,620 square-foot building on 7.18 acres for \$4,250,000 and spent another \$8,061,228 on planning and design, construction, and security and internal technology upgrades for a total of \$12,311,228. The property now houses critical county services that are open to the public, such as the County Clerk's office and the County Tax Office. These offices are open to the public and serve as an active use in this area that has spurred other redevelopment in the area.

The second project was similar and on the adjacent property to the north--the 5555 Airport Boulevard project, wherein the Travis County spent \$6,369,513 on the purchase and remodel of a vacant 58,000 square foot structure, which formerly housed a Haverty's Furniture store, but which now houses critical county offices including the Travis County Sheriff's office and the Fire Marshall's office. These expenditures included \$2,985,000 for the building purchase and \$3,384,513 in building upgrades, and were critical in repositioning an underutilized property and creating an upgraded space for functioning County offices, which benefits the neighborhood as a whole.

The third project is the most recent one, and involves repositioning a vacant site at 5325-5335 Airport, which currently is underutilized as surface parking, but formerly housed a vacant commercial building and a gas station/convenience store. This site was purchased by the County for \$3,550,000, and the County has spent an additional \$235,730 for demolition of the vacant 23,500 square foot commercial building, clean-up and minor improvements, for a total of \$3,785,730 expended. In response to an RFP, Travis County has selected a development team to develop this site into a vertical mixed use development, with a new tax office with retail space that fronts on Airport Boulevard and 146 units of affordable housing in two multi-story buildings served by structured parking. This development will dramatically improve the streetscape and neighborhood connectivity along sections of 53½ Street and Airport Boulevard with large sidewalks, lighting and streetscape landscaping. Additionally, the water runoff from the current 3-acre parking lot will now be treated via a newly constructed onsite water quality pond. As the first vertical mixed use project in the pipeline in this area, this project will certainly serve as a catalyst for other revitalization efforts in the planning area, especially given that it is scheduled for completion within the next two years.

The County's expenditures invested in this area come at a critical time as the City of Austin's ABCDP is in final form and is now ready to be implemented with funding from the City of Austin's 2016 Mobility Bond package that was approved in November 2016. This bond package allocates \$482,000,000 for corridor improvements in 8 key city corridors, and City staff has already been authorized to start the implementation process. The initial city estimate of the budget for these improvements in the Airport Corridor is \$20 million.

Because this area has been the subject of so much planning and expected public investment from both the County and the City, the area is also seeing a significant amount of new private investment. The Highland Mall, which is not part of this planning area, but is within the Airport Corridor, had fallen into partial vacancy as many businesses failed to thrive at that location due to the poor streetscape, visibility, and accessibility from major highways. The Highland Mall has been redeveloped and now serves as the home to the Austin Community College main campus. This development has spurred new development all along the Airport Corridor. A handful of new restaurants have opened between 53rd and 49th Streets,

and new construction is spotted along both Clarkson Avenue and 51st Street. Many homes have been recently remodeled or rebuilt, with few vacant lots remaining; and the majority of multi-family properties in the area are being updated.